

Chapter 1

Relative Ethics or Universal Ethics?

Iqbal is a boy, seven years of age, who must work 12 hours a day weaving rugs. In his culture child labor is customary. Around the world, in fact, there are millions of children who work to earn money instead of going to school. A recent report numbered child laborers, between five and 14 years of age, at over 200 million.

In some cultures, in order to protect young women from sexual advances of boys and men, they undergo at puberty the process of “breast ironing,” a cultural practice in which their breasts are pounded and massaged in order to make them disappear.

It is not a strong concern in some cultures that adults have heterosexual sex with young teens and children; and in other cultures, it is customary for men to have sexual relations with younger boys.

One last example of this kind. In order to preserve their chastity and honor, in some cultures girls from seven to 13 years of age have their clitoris surgically removed – it is known as female circumcision. Opponents of the practice call it female genital mutilation.

Are these practices ethical? What makes a cultural practice or social norm ethical or unethical?

Everyone is familiar with philosophizing about where ethical rules and standards come from. At one time or another we have all asked the questions, What makes something right or wrong? and Where does right and wrong come from?

1.1 Relative Ethics

These may seem to be very broad ethical questions, yet the existence of child labor, breast ironing, female circumcision, and divergent

sexual practices make them very real questions – and in some cases, where children’s lives are at stake, quite urgent. People have thought about and struggled with these kinds of questions about the origins of ethics for many centuries. When one faces these hard questions, thinks about the philosophical problem of the origins of ethics, and becomes aware of the great variety of human customs the world over, it becomes tempting to say that right and wrong are just a matter of opinion, since what is regarded as right or wrong in one culture may not be seen in the same way in another culture. Right and wrong seem culturally relative. Also, some practices that were once regarded as right, either a century ago or 20 years ago, are nowadays regarded as wrong. Ethical standards seem to change, and there is so much disagreement between cultural practices that *ethical relativism*, the view that right and wrong are always relative, seems justified.

Those who defend the idea that ethics is relative emphasize the differences among our ethical judgments and the differences among various ethical traditions. Some relativists call these cultural and ethical traditions *folkways*. This is a helpful concept for understanding ethical relativism because it points out to us that the ways and customs are simply developed by average people (folk) over long periods of time. Here is how the twentieth-century social scientist William G. Sumner describes the folkways:

The folkways . . . are not creations of human purpose and wit. They are like products of natural forces which men unconsciously set in operation, or they are like the instinctive ways of animals, which are developed out of experience, which reach a final form of maximum adaptation to an interest, which are handed down by tradition and admit of no exception or variation, yet change to meet new conditions, still within the same limited methods, and without rational reflection or purpose. From this it results that all the life of human beings, in all ages and stages of culture, is primarily controlled by a vast mass of folkways handed down from the earliest existence of the race. (Sumner 1906: 19–20)

Something is right, an ethical relativist will say, if it is consistent with a given society’s folkways and wrong if it goes against a society’s folkways. Relative ethics will say that in cultures where female circumcision has taken place for centuries, it is right to continue to circumcise young girls, and wrong to attempt to change this tradition.

Relativists believe that ethical differences between cultures are irreconcilable. On their view, irreconcilable differences are actually quite predictable because each society today has its own unique history and it is out of this history that a society's ethical values and standards have been forged. Around the globe, each society has its own unique history; consequently, each society has its own unique set of ethical standards. Relativists would say that if there are any *agreements* between cultures on ethical values, standards, or issues, we should not place any importance on that accidental fact, because, after all, the true nature of ethics is relative, and the origin of ethics lies in each society's unique history.

1.2 Universal Ethics

Not everyone, though, is content with the relativist's rather skeptical answer to the question about the ultimate nature and origin of ethics. Instead of a relativist answer to the question, plenty of people have asserted that *not everything* is relative. A critic of relativism will say that not everything in ethics is relative, because some aspects of ethics are universal. Those who hold this view are called *ethical universalists*. In contrast to the ethical relativist who claims that all ethics is relative, the universalists contend that there are *at least some* ethical values, standards, or principles that are *not* relative. And this somewhat modest claim is all that a universalist needs to challenge the relativist's generalization that all ethics is relative. An easy way to grasp what universalists are talking about is to consider the concept of universal human rights. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was created in 1948 by the United Nations General Assembly. It has inspired close to 100 bills of rights for new nations. People who believe in universal human rights hold ethical universalism: they believe there are certain rights that all human beings have, no matter what culture or society they belong to. An ethical relativist will deny this, and maintain that rights are meaningful only within a particular cultural tradition, not in a universal sense.

1.3 Cultural Relativism or Ethical Relativism?

In order to achieve a bit more clarity on the issue of relativism, we must consider the difference between *cultural* relativism and *ethical* relativism.

Cultural relativism is the observation that, as a matter of fact, different cultures have different practices, standards, and values. Child labor, breast ironing, divergent sexual practices, and female circumcision are examples of practices that are customary in some cultures and would be seen as ethical in those cultures. In other cultures, however, such practices are not customary, and are seen as unethical. If we took the time to study different cultures, as anthropologists and other social scientists do, we would see that there is no shortage of examples such as these. As the anthropologist Ruth Benedict has put it: "The diversity of cultures can be endlessly documented" (1934: 45).

As examples, consider wife and child battering, polygamy, cannibalism, or infanticide. There are some cultures (subcultures at least) that endorse these practices as morally acceptable. Western culture, by contrast, regards these practices as immoral and illegal. It seems to be true, therefore, just as a matter of fact, that different cultures have different ethical standards on at least some matters. By comparing different cultures, we can easily see differences between them, not just on ethical matters, but on many different levels.

What we need to notice about *ethical relativism*, in contrast with *cultural relativism*, is that ethical relativism makes a much stronger and more controversial claim. *Ethical relativism* is the view that *all* ethical standards are relative, to the degree that there are no permanent, universal, objective values or standards. This view, though, cannot be justified by simply comparing different cultures and noticing the differences between them. The ethical relativist's claim goes beyond observation and predicts that all ethical standards, even the ones we have not yet observed, will always be relative.

1.4 Cultural Relativism and Universal Ethics

A universalist will respond to ethical relativism by pointing out that very general basic values – not specific moral rules or codes – are recognized, at least implicitly, to some extent in all societies. Even though on the surface, in particular actions or mores, there seems to be unavoidable disagreement, a universalist will observe that there are general values that provide the foundations of ethics. One ambition, then, for the universalists who wish to immerse themselves in cultural studies, is not only to attempt to understand and appreciate other cultures' perspectives and experiences, but to detect what common

Diagram 1.1

Possible combinations:

- Cultural relativism & ethical relativism
- Cultural relativism & ethical universalism

ground – common values – are shared by the different cultures. Certainly there is cultural difference on how these values are manifested, but according to universalism, the values themselves represent more than arbitrary social conventions.

An ethical universalist, then, can agree that there are cultural differences and accept that some social practices are merely conventional. In other words, ethical universalism is consistent with cultural relativism (see Diagram 1.1).

Although ethical universalism is consistent with cultural relativism, social scientists from the first half of the twentieth century who have done extensive research into different cultures and societies have contributed to the linking in our minds of ethical relativism and cultural relativism. But the distinction between cultural relativism and ethical relativism is an important one to have in hand when one is reading the works of social scientists, for they can move from one to the other and back again without our noticing.

1.5 Ethics and Human Nature

We do find some scientists and philosophers of biology, however, who explicitly oppose ethical relativism; they deny ethical relativism because they assert that humans have a biological nature carried by their genes that cultures cannot obliterate but can only adjust to their unique circumstances. As the philosopher of science Michael Ruse puts it:

... the Darwinian's position does not plunge him/her into wholesale ethical relativism ... Against this, the Darwinian recognizes that there are indeed differences from society to society, and also within societies, particularly across time. However, these are readily (and surely properly) explained in the way that most moral theorists would explain them,

as secondary, modified consequences of shared primary moral imperatives. (Ruse 1998: 255)

Most theologians also distance themselves from ethical relativism. About the social sciences that sometimes tend toward relativism, the late Pope John Paul II described them as, “theories which misuse scientific research about the human person.” “Arguing from the great variety of customs, behaviour patterns and institutions present in humanity,” he said, “these theories end up, if not with an outright denial of universal human values, at least with a relativistic conception of morality” (1993: 49). Theologians can deny ethical relativism for monotheistic reasons, for instance. There is one God, they’ll say, so it makes sense that there would be universal ethical standards that are in harmony with God’s intentions.

The belief in a common human nature is not merely an assumption, but a belief rooted in observation. There is no doubt that social scientists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries emphasized differences between cultures and gave support to cultural and ethical relativism. But in the last quarter of the twentieth century, the human sciences have been swinging the pendulum to the side that observes shared deep structures concerning ethics and human nature. (This is not unrelated to the major advances in understanding the human genome.) In many sciences today (like evolutionary psychology) there is the perception that there are universal human traits having to do with human language, human facial expressions, the way the human mind works, human food preferences, etc. Evolutionists say that over millions of years these traits have been put into place by the process of natural selection. (It is true that theologians will offer a different account of how these traits have been put into place: they might say they are directly put into place by God, or perhaps indirectly by God via human evolution.) But the main point is that nowadays the view that we can observe common human traits comes from many fields, and it is not merely an unsupportable assumption made by ethical universalists.

1.6 Ethics and Human Rationality

Another way universalists have supported their case for ethical universalism is by pointing to universal features of human rationality. These

universalists seek to deny ethical relativism by asserting that humans have a rational nature that is not shaped by their cultural surroundings, but rather, is part of their human nature. Just as there are rules of logic and rational thinking that are universal, some ethical universalists say that there are ethical rules that are universal.

In this view, not only is it believed that there are rules of thought, i.e., rules that humans follow when they think, but that there are also *good* rules of thought, i.e., rules that humans *should* follow when they are thinking. What makes them good is that they give reliable results to the people who follow them. Some universalists, then, believe not only that there are ethical rules that humans follow (some of which were acquired solely because of the unique culture in which they were raised), but that there are good ethical rules that people *should* follow when they are living. Again, what makes them good ethical rules is that they give reliable results (happiness, success, flourishing) to the people who follow them. To explain how it is that people arrive at similar rules, the ethical rationalist will say it is because of our universal rationality.

1.7 Relative Ethics or Universal Ethics?

Ever since antiquity, relativism, as providing the best account of the ultimate nature of ethics, has gone in and out of favor among moral theorists. And just as long as there have been relativists, there have been universalists. On the whole, though, relativism has spent the most time out of favor.

A universalist will ask, having reflected about our experiences and identified common values, experiences, and emotions (respect, friendship, love, fear, etc.): Does it make sense to conclude that all human values are relative to the degree that there are no permanent, universal, objective values or standards? The universalist will say no, for the motives, actions, emotions, and relationships that we see in other cultures and societies will often have a counterpart in our own lives; and this should tell us that there are shared human values, if not on the surface then at least below the surface. Universalists will assert that ethical relativism is an exaggeration and the only truth in relativism is cultural relativism, because there is no doubt that we see ethical differences among different cultures.

In reading about different marriage rituals in different cultures, for example, we may infer that every society has different ideas about marriage and leave it at that (it's all relative!). The universalist says that if we look hard enough, however, we can bring to the surface the deeper shared values that our cultural and societal differences can often, but not always, obscure. In the case of marriage rituals, to stop at a relativistic conclusion would be to ignore the potential for a deeper probing into the values of relationship, cooperation, love, and companionship, some dimensions of human beings that have deeper roots than ethical relativists would have us think. The subset of features of who and what we are that are not culture-bound can range from basic human needs and values like those discussed by social scientists and evolutionary biologists, to those discussed by theologians.

One of the attractions of ethical relativism is that people believe it is a call for tolerance. Relativists (whether cultural or ethical) emphasize that there are differences between human ways of life and there doesn't seem to be one way of life that is *the* right way of living. It seems, then, that relativism would imply that we should tolerate other people who have different ways of living than we do.

We have to be careful here, though. A surface reading of ethical relativism tells us we ought to be tolerant of different ethical values and standards than ours. But if we look closely at what ethical relativism tells us, namely that right and wrong are relative, then whether we should be tolerant of others is *also* relative. The point of ethical relativism is, "When in Rome do as the Romans do." If we come from a cultural tradition that values tolerance then we should be tolerant, but if we come from a cultural tradition that *does not* value tolerance, then – to be consistent ethical relativists – we have no reason to be tolerant, for it is not part of our ethical values and standards.

A similar point can be made with human rights. An ethical relativist need not put a high priority on rights, for under the framework of ethical relativism, whether we value human rights is a matter of a culture's ethical tradition. As we saw above, this is not the view of ethical universalism. Universal human rights have a natural fit in an ethical universalist framework, not a relativist framework.

The same is true about tolerance. Even though, on the face of it, tolerance seems to have a natural fit with ethical relativism, upon closer examination it makes more sense to say that if one believes that tolerance is an important value no matter what culture we are talking about,

we are endorsing ethical universalism. To assert that one always must be tolerant of others could not possibly be an ethical relativist's claim, for ethics is relative. To assert that one *always* must be tolerant of others is assuming that tolerance is a universal guideline that must always be followed.

Actually, instead of describing tolerance as a value or a guideline, it is more appropriate to describe it as a virtue. We will continue to touch on the issue of relative ethics and universal ethics in the next chapter, which focuses on virtue ethics.

1.8 Conclusion

This chapter has dealt with three philosophical problems in ethics: the philosophical problem of the origins of ethics, the philosophical problem of relativism, and the philosophical problem of human nature.

Briefly, the theories of relative ethics and universal ethics each offer a different solution to the origins of ethics problem. Ethical relativists see ethics as of purely social origins, wholly dependent on society. Universal ethics denies this, and simply claims that not all ethical standards and values are relative. Where ethical relativism is most commonly supported by considerations of social anthropology, ethical universalism has been supported in a variety of ways: some ethical universalists say ethical universals have their origin in human nature, human biology, human rationality, or God. Fully solving the problem of the origins of ethics and fully answering its questions would involve providing a well-developed account of where ethical standards come from.

This chapter has also dealt with the philosophical problem of relativism. Again, relative ethics and universal ethics offer different solutions to this problem. For ethical relativists, the great variety of human customs the world over, the disagreement between cultures and eras, and how ethical standards change over time, provide evidence that right and wrong are *always* relative. The universalist solution to the problem of relativism, by contrast, is to distinguish between cultural relativism and ethical relativism and claim that the only truth in relativism is cultural relativism – there are observable differences between cultures on ethical standards. Even though it accepts cultural relativism, the universalist solution points to underlying shared transcultural

(universal) values that they assert cast doubt on the ethical relativist's claim that right and wrong is *always* relative. Fully solving the problem of relativism and fully answering its questions would involve providing a well-developed account concerning the existence and status of universal ethical values and principles.

Lastly, this chapter has also dealt briefly with the philosophical problem of human nature. Ethical relativism will emphasize how human beings and human cultures are very different from one another, and human beings are extremely flexible creatures. Given the unique geographic conditions, for example, and the unique history of a people, the kinds of customs and standards developed by a culture can be strikingly diverse. A universalist's solution to the problem of human nature, by contrast, points to the shared biological and psychological deep structures present in human nature, and shared rational and logical standards. The universalist ethical tradition views human beings as having a shared universal human nature. Fully solving the problem of human nature and fully answering its questions would involve providing a well-developed account of human nature that would draw on research from many fields of study, including the sciences and the humanities.

Concepts, Theories, and Traditions Introduced in Chapter 1

Concepts

Right/wrong is relative	Universal rationality
Relative values	Universal human nature
Folkways	Objective universal values and principles
Tolerance	Rights as universal
Rights are relative	

Theories

Cultural Relativism
Ethical Relativism
Ethical Universalism

Traditions

Relativism
Universalism

Review Questions

1. What is the main question that both Relative Ethics and Universal Ethics seek to answer?
2. What evidence supports Relative Ethics? How strong is that evidence?
3. What evidence supports Universal Ethics? How strong is that evidence?
4. What is the difference between Cultural Relativism and Ethical Relativism? Do you think this distinction helps to solve the problem of relativism?
5. How is it possible to reconcile Cultural Relativism with Ethical Universalism?
6. If I am firmly committed to tolerance and human rights, is my view more supported by Ethical Relativism or Ethical Universalism? Why?

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think cultural diversity tells us about the ultimate nature of ethics? Does it lead you to accept Ethical Relativism? Why or why not?
2. If Ethical Relativism is true, can there be genuine moral progress? For if all ethical standards are relative, then by what standard would you determine that moral progress, as opposed to mere moral change, is taking place? Explain.
3. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, created in 1948 by the United Nations General Assembly, has been revered by activists the world over. It has inspired more than 90 bills of rights for new nations. However, there are some rulers of foreign nations who call the document “Western” and claim that it does not reflect Asian, African, or Islamic values. Explain how we can look at this disagreement as one between Ethical Relativism and Ethical Universalism. Explain how one’s understanding of human rights is connected to whether one upholds Ethical Relativism or Ethical Universalism. Which view of ethics (Ethical Relativism or Ethical Universalism) and human rights do you think is most credible? Why?
4. If child labor is an acceptable norm in a culture different from ours, does that make it morally acceptable for *us* to purchase goods made by children in that culture? Or do we as individuals have a moral responsibility to avoid buying products that are made by child labor? Do situations such as these pose problems for Ethical Relativism? In your answer, be sure to distinguish between Cultural Relativism and Ethical Relativism.
5. In many developing countries, accepting bribes is a widespread form of police corruption. What would Cultural Relativism, Ethical Relativism, and Ethical Universalism imply about this practice? Explain.
6. If you work for a US company that does business in a foreign country in which bribes are acceptable, should you conform to local practice? What would Cultural Relativism, Ethical Relativism, and Ethical Universalism imply about this practice? Explain.
7. In many countries, women do not have equal rights with men. What would Cultural Relativism, Ethical Relativism, and Ethical Universalism imply about this fact? Explain.

8. In some cultures, in order to protect young women from sexual advances of boys and men, these young women at puberty undergo the process of “breast ironing,” a cultural practice in which their breasts are pounded and massaged to make them disappear. What would Cultural Relativism, Ethical Relativism, and Ethical Universalism imply about this practice? Explain.
9. Around the world, human beings engage in divergent sexual practices. When it comes to human sexuality, does it make sense to say there are any universal ethical standards or values? In your answer, be sure to distinguish between Cultural Relativism, Ethical Relativism, and Ethical Universalism.
10. In some cultures, to preserve their chastity and honor, girls from seven to 13 years of age have their clitoris surgically removed – it is known as female circumcision. From the perspectives of Ethical Relativism and Ethical Universalism, must we have toleration for this cultural practice?
11. On the internet look up the lyrics to the song “Like Me and You” by Raffi. Analyze the lyrics in terms of Cultural Relativism, Ethical Relativism, and Ethical Universalism.